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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY LJUBLJANA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5775
INFO RUEHVJ/AMEMBASSY SARAJEVO PRIORITY 0030
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L LJUBLJANA 000283

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EUR/NCE FOR SSADLE, ECA FOR DCROW, EUR/PPD FOR CMUDGETT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/03/2017
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PGOV](#) [OEXC](#) [KIRF](#) [SI](#)
SUBJECT: SLOVENIA: MUFTI GIVES MUSLIM ISSUES UPDATE AT
LUNCH WITH COM

Classified By: COM for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. The leader of the Slovenian Islamic community, Mufti Nedzad Grabus, told COM that the Slovenian Islamic community is finding its way through past troubles with leadership, on course to resolve the long-standing struggle to build a mosque in Ljubljana, and firmly anchored in the moderate camp of Islam. He and his deputy, both U.S. exchange program alumni, are opponents of radical Islam but do not see a significant radicalism problem here in Slovenia. Grabus told COM they are working hard on interfaith relations and relations with the GOS, and are ready to cooperate with the U.S. Embassy on future projects. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) COM hosted a lunch April 19 for the leader of the Slovenian Islamic community, Mufti Nedzad Grabus, and his deputy Nevzet Poric, the secretary of the Slovenian Islamic community. Poric recently returned from his Embassy-sponsored trip to the U.S. for the International Visitor Leadership Program's "Young Muslim Leaders" European Regional Project.

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Background on the Islamic Community in Slovenia
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¶3. (C) Grabus, who took up his duties in spring 2006, told COM that he spent his first year on the job getting to know the Muslim community in Slovenia. He said his priority was visiting local communities to assuage any residual misunderstandings since the departure of the previous Mufti, who split from the Muslim community leadership in Sarajevo in an attempt to create an independent Slovenian organization. Grabus said that his own efforts have been successful, noting that approximately 5,000 Muslims attended Slovenian Islamic community-organized Ramadan events while the previous Mufti has few if any followers and no capacity for programs.

¶4. (U) Grabus reported that approximately 90 percent of Slovenia's 50,000 Muslims are Bosniak with the greatest concentration in the northwestern steel town of Jesenice, where 20 percent of the population is Muslim. The remaining number include roughly 5,000 Albanians, 600 Macedonians, and a handful of Turks, Arabs, and visitors. In addition to that number, he reported that approximately 20,000 Bosnian Muslims temporarily reside in Slovenia at any one time as guest workers. Given that the majority of his flock came to Slovenia as economic migrants during Yugoslav times, Grabus said that there are a handful of professional Muslims (i.e. doctors, lawyers, and professors) that he is working hard to cultivate to be community leaders, but that the vast majority of followers in Slovenia are working class laborers who are

not prominent in their communities. He illustrated the void by noting that the University of Ljubljana has no Muslim professors while there are many Muslim professors at the University of Zagreb.

Places of Worship and the Saga of the Ljubljana Mosque

15. (U) While there is still no mosque in Slovenia, Grabus said that the Islamic community has 13 places of worship (mostly private homes or rented buildings), and with the exception of one unfriendly neighbor at one location, there have been no problems. He indicated that for many Muslims in Slovenia, their religious community is their main social focal point. Fifteen muslim-affiliated religious and community organizations scattered around Slovenia serve as de-facto community centers and children's play centers, and work on minor education projects dealing with pressing topics like drugs and human rights. Grabus said these organizations operate without any problems from the national or local governments, or from their local non-muslim communities.

16. (SBU) On the much contested topic of a mosque in Ljubljana, Grabus was relatively upbeat. He said that new Mayor Zoran Jankovic was saying the right things about moving the project forward and had told him that the city is working on cutting through bureaucratic red tape and that he promised an answer on the current site proposal by May. Grabus seemed optimistic that the land sale and permit process could begin and conclude within 2007 and that construction work could realistically begin on a site as early as spring 2008. It is clear that Grabus is in regular contact with the city of Ljubljana on the issue and that he expects Jankovic to be closely involved in negotiations to complete the deal. Grabus noted that when all the details were finalized the

Islamic Community would sign a formal contract with Jankovic to formally begin the project. When asked whether he had any input related to the mosque for the upcoming religious freedom report, Grabus wryly responded "ask me again in May."

Muslim Extremism and Funding for the New Mosque

17. (C) Grabus downplayed the presence of Islamic fundamentalists in Slovenia (though he disparagingly noted that the previous Mufti was influenced by radicals), saying that he felt there were only a handful -- "maybe 10 to 15" -- Wahhabi in Slovenia and that their ideology was not getting support or interest from his flock of European-oriented Muslims. He spun the necessity of a mosque in Ljubljana as an anti-extremism measure, saying that a mosque was "more important for the Government of Slovenia (than the Islamic community)," because it would strengthen his moderate community of Muslims while isolating any potential extremist elements.

18. (C) Grabus was open to discussion of financing for the mosque, and he responded to COM's general inquiry by stating matter-of-factly that he expected to be approached with offers for financial support for the mosque from representatives of significantly more conservative factions of Islam or Islamic governments in the Middle East. He quickly pointed out that he had spurned other offers of cooperation in the past with Middle Eastern organizations (noting that he has twice turned down offers to collaborate with scholars in Iran) and that the Slovenian Islamic community would not accept donations that had ideological strings attached. He said he strongly preferred to raise funding from the local Islamic community and from like-minded moderate Muslims in Bosnia and, perhaps, Turkey or Kuwait. He did not feel the Slovenian Islamic community could raise sufficient funds on its own. More than finances, Grabus said that the most pressing problem would be finding enough qualified and educated Muslims to run the extensive

programming he hopes to have at the mosque.

Interfaith Relations, GOS Relations, and the New Religious
Communities Act

¶9. (U) Grabus was upbeat about interfaith relations in Slovenia and relations between the Islamic community and the GOS. He noted that when Pope Benedict XVI's academic lecture in Germany last year caused controversy in Muslim communities around the world he reached out and spoke at length to Catholic leaders in Slovenia to discuss the incident. He said that he sees other faith leaders regularly, that relations are cordial. He was particularly positive about the GOS Office for Religious Communities and its regular interfaith outings, which draw together leaders from all of Slovenia's registered religious groups for informal discussions and cultural excursions to religious sites in the country. Grabus was pleased to point out two recent successes in the Islamic community's relations with the GOS: (1) a formal agreement with the GOS on the position of the Islamic community in Slovenia, and (2) permission from local officials to replace crosses marking the graves of Bosnian Muslim soldiers who died in World War I with an Islamic symbol (the 105 graves in a military cemetery near the village of Log pod Mangartom were adorned with crosses by Italians in 1933 during the inter-war Italian rule in that region).

¶10. (U) Grabus told COM that he was in favor of the recently passed Religious Communities Act (which has been widely criticized by opposition, left-of-center politicians for favoring the Catholic Church). He said that while the law seems to favor the Roman Catholic Church, this should be expected in a majority Catholic country and that the original law, passed in the 1970s, was desperately in need of updating. Grabus expected any increase in funds to the Islamic community (via a plank in the law that allows Slovenes to donate 0.5% of their salaries to religious charities) to be minimal and said that the Muslim community will continue to get very modest benefits from the state (approximately 1,200 Euros per month for 12 people) under a portion of the law that allows the state to pay into social security and pension plans for religious community leaders.

Moderate Leadership Well Exposed to U.S. Perspectives on Islam

¶11. (SBU) Grabus, who spent a semester in the U.S. in spring 2006 participating in a State Department-financed partnership between Arizona State University and the University of Sarajevo, was extremely positive about the U.S. and about relations and feelings between Bosnian Muslims and Americans. He said Bosnian Muslims and Americans are very similar in their open-mindedness and that the U.S. was a good model for Bosnia given that it will have to be a country based on multiple ethnic groups. He talked extensively about the need for Bosnian Muslims to be an example for other Muslim groups and that it would be a good thing if the Bosnian "moderate, European-oriented" version of Islam spread to other Islamic communities. In reference to the political demonstrations that erupted over the past few years over cartoon pictures of Mohammed, he expressed disappointment in seeing "Arabs use Islam as a tool for this" and noted that the "protesters are examples of people who are not free."

¶12. (SBU) Nedzad Poric spoke briefly about his trip to the U.S., reviewing the different stops on his trip and the highlights of each. He commented on the special relationship that developed within the group and offered a few relatively minor suggestions for improvement of administrative items, all of which he told us he shared at the debriefing in the U.S. Poric's response to the trip was generally positive. During lunch, Grabus noted that Poric's relationship with the previous Mufti soured when Poric opposed the Mufti's plans

for a more conservative platform. It is clear by this and by Grabus's description of Poric as a young person that he is working hard to develop as a leader in the community, that he was a solid choice for the program and will continue to be a good Embassy contact for the years to come.

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Slovenian Islamic Community-American Embassy Relations
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¶13. (U) COM engaged Grabus on how best the U.S. Embassy can work with the Islamic community in the future. Grabus said that the Embassy certainly could be of assistance by (1) talking with Foreign Minister Rupel and other GoS officials to encourage their strong support of the Islamic Community and their need for a mosque, (2) continuing the Embassy's tradition of supporting dialogue between religious and ethnic groups in Slovenia, and (3) working with the Islamic community on programs once they get settled with a mosque and formal community center. On the third point, Grabus said there is a small but active Muslim women's group that would probably be a good partner for cooperation on a USG program.

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Comment
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¶14. (C) Grabus is smart and insightful, politically savvy, and seems firmly in the moderate camp. Through his leadership it appears that the Slovenian Islamic community is finding its way through past troubles with leadership and the current struggle for a mosque. He is saying the right things on radicalism and all signs show that he will hold firm to his beliefs when conservative Islamic donors arrive to woo his community with funding for the mosque. If his stated intentions become reality, the Slovenian Islamic community could be an exemplar of what a modern Muslim community in Europe can be. It seems likely (as his protege obliquely referenced at lunch) that Grabus could be poised for a greater leadership role in the Muslim community in Bosnia once his term in Slovenia concludes.

ROBERTSON